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ARTICLES:

(1) When will Lower House be dissolved? In April, July, September?  
Psychological war going on with eye on political realignment

In the 171st ordinary session of the Diet to be convened on Jan. 5, deliberations will focus on the second supplementary budget for fiscal 2008 and the fiscal 2009 budget. Prime Minister Aso Taro has pledged to make Japan the world's first country to emerge from the global recession by implementing after the budgets clear the Diet government-drafted fiscal and financial measures totaling 75 trillion yen in projects. However, Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) President Ichiro Ozawa intends to force an early dissolution of the House of Representatives, saying: "The public will not be troubled if the general election is held in January." As such, the ordinary Diet session will be turbulent from the beginning. With an eye on Sept. 10, when the terms of the Lower House members expire, the question is when Aso will make the decision to dissolve the lower chamber for a snap election.

Visiting at Aso's private residence in Kamiyama-cho, Shibuya Ward, the LDP's Election Strategy Council Deputy Chairman Yoshihide Suga said on the afternoon of Jan. 3:

"In any case, since the Lower House must be dissolved by the end of September, let's lock horns with the opposition camp from the beginning (of the ordinary session). You must not make any concessions."

Aso then nodded his head. Aso relaxed at home during his winter vacation. He was quoted as showing strong confidence the budgets would pass.

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The government and ruling parties intend to get the second supplementary budget through the Lower House in mid-January. Set off by this, chances are strong that maneuvering will intensify between the ruling and opposition camps. The reason is because there is a possibility that the opposition will drag out deliberations on the supplementary budget in the House of Councillors in order to prevent the prime minister and ministers from attending deliberations on the fiscal 2009 budget, which will start in the Lower House.

There is more time left in terms of the Diet schedule, since the budgets are naturally enacted 30 days after they are passed by the Lower House. In order to enact the bills related to the budgets before the end of the current fiscal year, however, it is necessary to get the budget-related bills pass through the Lower House by the end of January with an eye on Article 59 of the Constitution, which allows for a bill to be sent back to the Lower House if rejected by the Upper House or if the bill has not been voted on within 60 days after being presented to the upper chamber. In addition, in a bid to pass the fiscal 2009 budget before the end of fiscal 2008, the Lower House must pass the fiscal 2009 budget within February. If the Upper House continues deliberations during the daytime, there will be no choice for the Lower House but to hold deliberations from the evening through midnight.

If the flat-sum cash-payout plan is not implemented, the Aso cabinet will suffer a serious blow. If the ruling coalition fails to manage the Diet schedule until February as planned, the possibility of the Lower House being dissolved in April through talks with the opposition may move closer to reality. Under this scenario, Aso would promise to dissolve the Lower House in return for quick passage of the budget bills by the Upper House. It is questionable whether Aso would accept this scenario, since there is a possibility that Aso's resignation would become a condition. A strategy of holding the budget bills hostage will bring a huge risk to the opposition camp, as well. As a result, a war of nerves will continue between the ruling and opposition camps.

(2) Watanabe's possible leaving the party have a minor impact: LDP

Yoshimi Watanabe, former state minister in charge of administrative reform, has decided to leave the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) if his call for scrapping the flat-sum cash-payout plan is not accepted. Watanabe's decision underscores the extent of the decline in Prime Minister Taro Aso's hold over the LDP. Senior LDP members predict that Watanabe's leaving would only have a minor impact on the party. However, because the ordinary Diet session is about to convene, Watanabe's possible resignation from the LDP will likely create waves in both the ruling and opposition camps.

Having in mind the possible formation of a new party before the next House of Representatives election, Watanabe appears to be intending to gather together supporters from both the ruling and opposition parties. LDP Secretary General Hiroyuki Hosoda said in a meeting last night of senior ruling coalition members: "Watanabe will be the only LDP member leaving." Asked by reporters about his view on Watanabe's call for scrapping the flat-sum cash-payment plan, New Komeito leader Akihiro Ota said: "It is only natural to implement what we have decided. I want him to handle that responsibly."

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At his first press conference of the year, Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) President Ichiro Ozawa refrained from commentating on Watanabe's move in detail by saying: "I haven't talked with him directly. He is still an LDP lawmaker. I'm not in a position to make a comment."

On Dec. 24 last year, Watanabe defiantly voted for a DPJ-backed resolution calling for an immediate dissolution of the Lower House. Even after he was punished by the LDP, receiving a warning, he has continued criticizing the Aso administration. Citing the flat-sum benefit plan, totaling 2 trillion yen, which he says has a bad reputation among the public, he has indicated that unless revisions are made to the government-drafted fiscal 2008 second supplementary budget and related bills, he will again defy the Aso government.

(3) Visit to Hiroshima by President Bush considered in 60th postwar year

MAINICHI (Page 1) (Almost full)  
January 3, 2009

Takahiro Takino

The U.S. Embassy in Tokyo studied in 2005, the 60th year after the end of the war, the possibility of a visit to Hiroshima by President George W. Bush, an embassy source revealed.

A U.S. President has never set foot in any atomic-bombed city. There has never been any sign of Japan strongly seeking such a visit, either. If accomplished, it would have played up the maturity of Japan-U.S. relations 60 years after the war and been seen as an attempt to overcome an unmentionable taboo.

The intention of having President Bush stop over in Hiroshima before or after the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum scheduled for November 2005 in South Korea's Busan was also to send a message to North Korea about its nuclear ambitions. Japan's relations with China and South Korea were chilly due to then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. Given the situation, the United States forwent the Hiroshima plan to avoid the misunderstanding that it had sided with Japan.

According to an U.S. Embassy source, the United States studied a similar plan in 1995, the 50th anniversary of the end of the war. The plan did not materialize because a schoolgirl in Okinawa was raped by three U.S. Marines in September that year. The Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum planned that year to exhibit A bomb-related materials, but that, too, was cancelled due to fierce objections from U.S. veterans and Congress. The source said: "The problem was that the organizer's approach had been poor. There was plenty of possibility for the event to have taken place."

Momentum continued even after the milestone years. Lower House Speaker Yohei Kono visited the USS Arizona National Memorial in Pearl Harbor in late December 2008. U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (of the Democratic Party), the third in line for the Presidency after the Vice President, also visited the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima in September.

Further, in response to a question by a Japanese reporter

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immediately before the Lake Toya Summit last July about the possibility of his visiting Hiroshima, President Bush said: "Although I have never heard of such, it's an interesting idea." The envisaged visit was defined as an opportunity to pay tribute to the victims of the atomic bombing rather than to offer an apology for the dropping of the atomic bomb.

Momentum to scrap nuclear weapons built in the United States last year. The Democratic Party at its national convention in August adopted a platform specifying a plan to pursue the ultimate abolition of nuclear weapons. President-elect Barack Obama has announced that he would appoint Harvard University Prof. John Holdren to serve as Assistant to the President for Science and Technology, the post that has been vacant over the last eight years. He is the person who gave the acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995 on behalf of the Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs.

On the night of December 18, 2008, at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) President John Hamre, a candidate for defense secretary, made this request to Japanese ruling and opposition party leaders, including former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and former Defense Minister Yuriko Koike of the Liberal Democratic Party and former President Seiji Maehara of the Democratic Party of Japan: "The first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (STARTI) expires in 2009. The year 2009 will be an important year for the nuclear issue in view of the fact that the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NTP) will be re-discussed in the following year. The United States will conduct broad-based nuclear arms reduction talks with Russia. I would like to see Japan's support."

A visit to Hiroshima by President Obama would do much to bring about closure to the postwar period. It also would probably be seen as symbolic of America's new nuclear policy.

2009 will be the 49th year since the revision of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (in 1960). For Japan to maintain influence in the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear issue, the key is in finding a way to bring the U.S. along. Japan, as the only country that suffered atomic bombings, will now be tested.

(4) Japan still locked in Cold War mentality

MAINICHI (Page 2) (Abridged slightly)  
January 3, 2009

Takashi Sudo

Throughout the postwar period, while working to deepen their bilateral alliance, Japan and the United States have been avoiding facing up to the paradox between the legacy of the atomic bombings of Japan and the U.S. nuclear umbrella covering Japan. Although Japan has aimed at the abolition of all nuclear weapons, it has never pursued the United States' "crime against humanity."

But given the passage of over 60 years after the end of the war, a multi-polarized world, and the global trend of nuclear nonproliferation, a day may come in the tenure of President Barack Obama to turn the unforgotten historical page for a true reconciliation between Japan and the United States, with nuclear security as the lever.

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U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Hiroshima last September, and Japan's Lower House Speaker Yohei Kono laid a wreath at Pearl Harbor in December. Their acts largely reflect their political beliefs. As seen in the release of the Kono Statement that offered an apology by acknowledging the Imperial Japanese Army's involvement in the forceful recruitment of the so-called "comfort women," Kono has special feelings toward Japan's historical events. Pelosi is a liberal from San Francisco who attaches importance to human rights.

Although some think that their visits carried little diplomatic significance, it is a fact that the events went down in the postwar history of Japan-U.S. relations. They have produced a momentum for reciprocal visits to those sites by the Japanese prime minister and the U.S. President.

In January 2007 and January 2008, the Wall Street Journal ran proposals calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons, signed by former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz and other foreign affairs heavyweights. Support has spread among scholars, as well. People have begun discussing an argument for nuclear abolition as a pragmatic policy approach to stop nuclear proliferation.

At the same time, a Cold War mentality is still very much alive among Japanese lawmakers. A party-head debate took place in July 2007 between the heads of the Liberal Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Japan. In the session, DPJ President Ichiro Ozawa asked: "Don't you have a plan to ask the United States for an apology for dropping the atomic bombs?" Prime Minister Shinzo Abe replied: "I don't think it's proper to seek a U.S. apology while our country is relying on its nuclear deterrence."

Although he advocated breaking away from the postwar regime, Shinzo Abe, as the prime minister of Japan, which is still under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, remained locked in a Cold-War mentality of shying away from pursuing the United States' "crime" of having dropped atomic bombs on Japan.

Despite growing calls for nuclear abolition in the United States, there are no visible moves in Japanese political and diplomatic circles to go beyond the framework of the Cold War-era nuclear strategy.

There is no doubt that a visit to Hiroshima by President Obama would give the world an impression that change has come to U.S. nuclear policy. Whether the nuclear disarmament trend can help bring about reconciliation between Japan and the United States in the postwar era depends on the conceptual ability of Japanese diplomacy.

(5) Finance Ministry to set up intellectual property protection fund for developing countries in cooperation with WCO

NIKKEI (Page 3) (Full)  
January 4, 2009

The Finance Ministry will help developing countries protect their intellectual properties. To that end, it will set up a new fund under the World Customs Organization (WCO), an international organization of customs houses, to develop the capabilities of customs officers of developing countries by using this fund. Contributing funds for the purpose of protecting intellectual properties at the water's edge is an unusual step. The Finance

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Ministry will seek cooperation from other countries, as well. It will aim at stopping articles that violate intellectual property rights from being exported by tightening restrictions at customs houses in emerging and developing countries.

The WCO is a Brussels-based international organization of customs houses with a membership of about 170 countries. The Finance Minister will establish possibly before the end of the month a fund specified for protecting intellectual properties as part of the

WCO's customs house cooperation fund and disburse approximately 200 million yen. It will continue to provide funds in fiscal 2009 and beyond. It will call on the U.S. and European countries to also contribute funds.

Kunio Mikuriya, a former Finance Ministry official, on January 1, 2009 took office as secretary general of the WCO. He is the first Japanese WCO secretary general. The Finance Ministry wants to support the new Mikuriya setup with financial contributions.

The fund will be used for the training of customs officers of developing countries who inspect goods being imported or exported. To be precise, the Finance Ministry plans to dispatch WCO officials and customs officers of industrialized countries, such as Japan, to developing countries to teach local customs officers the features and kinds of fake brand-name goods and products carrying fake names of manufactures, and how to crack down on trade in such goods. The WCO will conduct a fact-finding survey to determine the level of customs officials and the situation of the violation of intellectual properties in about 10 developing countries a year so as to determine the capabilities of customs houses of those countries.

Goods that violate intellectual property rights, such as China-made motorbikes carrying the trademarks of Japanese makers, are being traded among emerging and developing countries, causing much damage. There has also been a report of a case in which medicines pretending to be a magic bullet for AIDS were exported to Africa and Latin America where the patients administered those medicines died. The perception that it is necessary to protect intellectual properties at the water's edge is spreading in emerging and developing countries, as well.

(6) Japan, South Korea joint poll: 51 PERCENT of Japanese respondents feel friendship toward South Korea, compared to 37 PERCENT of South Koreans

MAINICHI (Page 1) (Full)  
January 4, 2009

Mainichi Shimbun and Chonsun Ilbo, a newspaper published in Seoul, carried out a joint poll last December. Asked whether they felt friendship toward the other country, Japanese with such feelings toward South Korea totaled 51 PERCENT, adding those who felt great friendship and those feeling somewhat friendly. In contrast, 37 PERCENT of South Koreans felt friendship toward Japan, indicating that more Japanese felt friendly toward that country in Japan than did South Koreans toward Japan.

This is the fifth time for the joint survey, which was launched in 1995. Mainichi Shimbun conducted it on December 6 and 7, while the Chonsun Ilbo made its survey on the 20th and the 21st. The responses totaled 1031 and 1052 responses, respectively.

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The previous poll in July 2002, right after the joint hosting of the 2002 Soccer World Cup, produced the highest rates of friendship between the two countries: 77 PERCENT for Japan and 42 PERCENT for South Korea. The rate having dropped 26 points since that peak year has now returned to the level of the 1999 poll, when it had reached 48 PERCENT.

In the South Korea poll, those feeling no friendship toward Japan stood at 62 PERCENT. However, for young persons between 19 and 29, those with friendly feelings toward Japan reached 49 PERCENT, probably reflecting the popularity of Japanese pop music and anime cartoons. Fifty one percent of that age bracket felt no friendship toward Japan. There are marked differences in views toward Japan depending on the age bracket. On the question of North Korea's nuclear weapons program, 46 PERCENT of the Japanese thought pressure on that country should be increased, while 39 PERCENT wanted priority given to dialogue. In South Korea, 75 PERCENT gave priority to dialogue, three times the 23 PERCENT who thought pressure should be increased.

(7) TOP HEADLINES

Asahi, Mainichi, Yomiuri, Sankei & Tokyo Shimbun:  
Israel begins ground attack on Gaza

Nikkei:  
Government eyeing patent law revisions to include software

Akahata:  
Food, clothing and housing, as well as jobs must be secured

(8) EDITORIALS

Asahi:  
(1) Lower House election should be conducted quickly  
(2) Alcoholics on increase among the elderly

Mainichi:  
(1) Global economic recession: Cooperation is the prescription for recovery, create joint projects in East Asia

Yomiuri:  
(1) Fundamental change needed to lift economy

Nikkei:  
(1) Make the environment, energy leading players in bringing about economic recovery

Sankei:  
(1) Good opportunity for constitutional review  
(2) Why should Tokyo host Olympics?

Tokyo Shimbun:  
(1) Thoughts at beginning of the year: Obama's era and the East European revolution of 1989

Akahata:  
(1) Crisis of Japan-U.S. alliance: In order to carry out international contribution, Japan-U.S. Security Treaty should be abolished

(9) Prime Minister's schedule, January 3

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NIKKEI (Page 2) (Full)  
January 4, 2009

11:00 Had a walk around his private residence in Kamiyamacho.  
15:49 Met LDP Election Strategy Council Vice Chairman Makoto Suga at his private residence, joined in by Chief Cabinet Secretary Kawamura and his wife. Kawamura stayed on.  
17:30 Placed a telephone call to Palestinian leader Abbas in the presence of Kawamura, Assistant Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi, and Foreign Ministry Middle Eastern and African Affairs Bureau Director-General Suzuki. Kawamura stayed on.

Prime Minister's schedule, January 4

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Full)  
January 5, 2009

09:09 Met at the Kantei Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Matsumoto, joined in by LDP presidential special assistant Shimamura.

10:00 Held a New Year press conference. Afterward met Chief Cabinet Secretary Kawamura.

11:10 Departed from JR Tokyo Station on Nozomi No. 23, accompanied by MAFF Minister Ishiba, Administrative Reform Minister Amari, Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretaries Matsumoto and Konoike.

12:51

Arrived at JR Nagoya Station, received by LDP Aichi chapter chairman Omura.

12:57

Met Aichi Gov. Kanda and others in the Kintetsu VIP room.

13:10

Departed from the station on a Kintetsu express.

14:33

Arrived at Kintetsu Ujiyamada St., received by Mie Gov. Noro and others.

14:40

Arrived at Ise Shrine. Paid homage at Outer Shrine.

15:08

Paid homage at Inner Shrine.

15:46

Received bouquets in front of Shrine Office from the Boy Scout Association of Japan Ise 7th Group and the Girl Scout Association of Japan Mie 1st Group.

16:24

Departed from Kintetsu Ujiyamada St. on a Kintetsu express.

17:42

Arrived at Kintetsu Nagoya St.

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17:45

Met JR Tokai Chairman Kasai and others in the JR Nagoya Station VIP room.

18:14

Departed from the station on Nozomi No. 140.

19:56

Arrived at JR Tokyo St.

20:15

Dined at a Hotel Okura Japanese restaurant with LDP Secretary General Hosoda, Policy Research Council Chairman Hori, Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Oshima, New Komeito Representative Ota, Secretary General Kitagawa, in the presence of Chief Cabinet Secretary Kawamura.

21:10

Returned to his private residence in Kamiyamacho.

SCHIEFFER